“Losing Neutrality in Your Everyday Life”: Framing Experience and Activist Identity Construction in the Spanish Environmental Movement

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Abstract

This article draws on the framing perspective to analyze identity construction. Based on the analysis of thirty in-depth interviews with members of a Spanish environmental movement organization, the author demonstrates how activists construct their identities and frame their personal experience. On one hand, activists align their personal identities with larger conceptions of group identity. On the other, they frame the uniqueness of personal experience in a biographical story that sustains their activism. The author analyzes how these two aspects come together in practice through several identity construction processes. Specifically, she examines how identity extension and identity transformation account for self-construction, and elaborate a third process, which she calls biographical identity integration. Biographical identity integration fills an analytical gap in the framing literature and sheds

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light on the complex relationship that exists between personal experience and identity construction in movement contexts.

**Keywords**

identity construction, framing, personal experience, environmentalism, Spain

A person can genuinely agree with the proposition that since humans cause climate change, they can do something to correct their impact on the environment. Yet agreeing with this proposition does not necessarily make one an environmentalist. Some people share frames about the natural environment with environmentalists without embracing the identity of environmentalist. In other words, people do not simply adopt environmental frames and automatically become environmentalists; rather, they are environmentalists because they construct an activist identity. How do they go about constructing such an identity? The framing perspective can answer this question by analyzing how people frame their personal experiences to define what being an activist means to them.

Unlike other approaches to social movements, the framing perspective gives analytical priority to the study of frames and explores how framing processes structure identity in social movement contexts (Gamson 1992; Hunt and Benford 1994; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994). While the literature on framing has made important contributions to the study of identity in social movements, it needs to develop a clearer theoretical explication of the alignment of personal and collective identities (Benford and Snow 2000; Hunt and Benford 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker, Owens, and White 2000).

To examine the alignment between these two aspects of identity, I focus on three key identity construction processes: biographical identity integration, identity extension, and identity transformation. I begin by introducing the concept of biographical identity integration to describe how social movement participants interweave past personal experiences into a unifying biography that fits an activist identity. Biographical identity integration fills an analytical gap in the framing literature and sheds light on the complex relationship that exists between personal experience and identity construction. I subsequently examine *identity extension* and *identity transformation* among social movement participants (Snow and McAdam 2000). The former process is characterized by the progressive introduction of activist frames into areas of personal life previously undetermined by activism. By contrast,
identity transformation entails activists peeling off old self-understandings and acquiring new ones.

Through revealing and describing these processes of activist identity work, my study contributes not only to the scholarship on framing, but also to the literature on activist identities in different environmental movements in the United States and abroad (Ingalsbee 1996; Lichterman 1996; Shepherd 2002; Statham 1995).

Identity Construction in Social Movements

Sociologists use the framing perspective to study identity dynamics in social movements. Drawing on Goffman (1974), the framing perspective centers on how people make sense of their participation in social movements (Gamson 1992; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow and McAdam 2000; Snow et al. 1986; cf. Benford 1997).

Since its classic formulation, scholars have used the framing perspective to analyze a variety of social movement dynamics. Research has focused on the alignment between individual and collective action frames (Snow et al. 1986) and between collective action frames and ideological constructs (Snow and Benford 2000). In this essay, I concentrate on the alignment between individual and collective identities.

While some studies analyze identity convergence as conceptualized by Snow and McAdam (2000; see, e.g., Broad 2002), the concept of identity construction proves more fruitful to explore the creative and agentic processes by which social movement actors develop their identities. Snow and McAdam (2000, 49) define identity construction as “the process through which personal and collective identities are aligned, such that individuals regard engagement in movement activity as being consistent with their self-conception and interests.” Four modalities of identity construction reveal the alignment of personal and collective identities: identity amplification, identity consolidation, identity extension, and identity transformation (Snow and McAdam 2000, 49).

In addition, the framing perspective on social movements provides other important concepts to theorize the relation between identity and framing (Hunt and Benford 1994; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994). Hunt, Benford, and Snow (1994) define three identity fields in the study of social movements: protagonists, antagonists, and audiences. Equally important is Hunt and Benford’s (1994) analysis of identity talk among peace and justice movement activists. These framing scholars demonstrate how activists define a sense of who they are through “retrospective reconstructions of the past”
(Hunt and Benford 1994, 492). They identify six types of stories that activists
tell to construct their identities: “associational declarations,” “disillusion-
ment anecdotes,” “atrocity tales,” “‘personal is political’ reports,” “guide
narratives,” and “war stories.” Hunt and Benford’s work underscores how
movement participants create and circulate stories among themselves for the
purposes of identity construction. The conceptualization that I present in this
article extends the larger focus of the framing perspective on identity con-
struction and narrative (Benford 2000; Fine 1995; Goffman 1961) by concen-
trating on the processes of biographical identity integration.

Data and Methods

The setting of this analysis is Spain, a Southern European country whose
environmental politics are still underresearched (but for exceptions see
2002). The first Spanish environmental organizations formed in the 1950s
(Fernández 1999). During the 1960s, the emerging Spanish environmental
movement was opposed to Franco’s authoritarian regime but was damaged
seriously in its development by the “political opportunity structure” (Eisinger
1973). This opportunity structure was defined by the regime’s recognition of
no other political persona than its own fascist movement, and was transformed
with Franco’s death in 1975. Not surprisingly, the movement against Franco’s
dictatorship gave rise to the postauthoritarian environmental movement in
Spain (Aguilar Fernández 1997). In the 1980s, state policy changes and mem-
bership in the European Economic Community (EEC) changed the context of
mobilization for environmental organizations in Spain, giving the movement
more opportunities for change through institutional means (Jiménez 1999).

The city where I conducted my study is among the largest cities in Western
Europe. This city is highly urban and populated. I am deeply familiar with the
city’s politics and its social movement activities; I have taken part in numer-
ous demonstrations and political activities in the urban center and in the sub-
urbs. In addition, I am from Spain and have an in-depth knowledge of the
country and the recent history of activism there.

My data come from a case study of a city chapter of Asociaciones
Ecologistas Unidas (AEU). I obtained institutional review board approval for
this study and the names of this organization and its members are pseudo-
onyms. AEU is a Spanish nation-wide coalition of environmental groups of
recent creation and an influential national-level actor in the Spanish environ-
mental movement. It stands out as an example of successful centraliza-
tion in a context with a traditionally low level of environmental organization
(Jiménez 1999; Kousis 1999). Since its inception, AEU has brought together conservationists and political or social ecologists. Conservationists aspire to defend “the environment understood largely in terms of natural heritage (parks, fauna, coasts, etc.)” (Diani and Lodi 1988, 104). Conservationists place emphasis on consciousness-raising, education, and action to influence relevant institutions; in stark contrast, political ecologists denounce “the capitalist pattern of development” as the cause of environmental degradation, and aspire to establish alliances with other contesting groups that oppose this capitalist logic (Diani and Lodi 1988, 105).

The city chapter I studied had few members on its staff and the members came from a diversity of activist backgrounds. The chapter was committed to consensus-driven decision making through an assembly model, which ideally excluded voting mechanisms. AEU members were expected to attend assembly sessions and no time limits were imposed on members when they were expressing an idea or discussing an issue or concern.

The city chapter was organized in “work groups,” which represented the different areas of interest and action of its members (e.g., natural environment, energy, urbanism and transportation, environmental education, GMOs, and legal aid). Work groups met regularly to brainstorm, analyze, and deliberate about specific environmental issues. They usually prepared reports, pamphlets, or other relevant written materials. Reports and other written materials required research, data follow-up, or a specific type of expertise. The type of expertise required varied depending on the work group. For example, the legal aid work group, in addition to preparing legal guides for general consultation, also engaged in law suits. By contrast, the work group on environmental education created teaching materials for the workshops under its supervision.

AEU members engaged in a remarkably wide range of activities, including networking and recruitment of new members; preparation of press releases and written responses to media representation of issues and events; organization of campaigns focused on specific environmental issues; participation in environmental protest events and ally mobilizations; serving customers at the organization’s bar; cleaning the headquarters; and mailing organizational materials and distributing pamphlets.

I came into contact with the leadership of AEU through a close friend of mine, a long-time environmentalist and member of AEU. The organization granted me easy entrée. However, I had an outsider role in the field, because I was not a member of the organization nor was I living in the city at the time.

I conducted thirty semistructured interviews in Spanish with AEU members and transcribed them. I used convenience and snowball sampling to select
my study participants. My final sample had equal number of women and men; presence of members of different local organizations integrated in the city chapter of the organization; leaders, rank and file, and staff members. I collected demographic information on all the participants. The majority of the participants in the sample had college degrees; three had received doctorates. A third of the sample had a college degree in engineering or in the natural sciences (Biology, Geology, Physics, and Chemistry). The youngest interviewee was twenty-four years old and the oldest was seventy-six years old.

Guided by my theoretical interests, I asked study participants questions to examine the relationship between individual and collective identities within this organization. Specifically, I asked participants to tell me about the process of becoming an activist, that is, how they got involved with this organization, which in many cases led them to explore in detail their previous activism. I also asked them about any perceptions of self-change they experienced as a result of their activism and about the general impact their social movement participation had on different facets of their lives. In addition to in-depth interviews, I also analyzed a convenience sample of pamphlets and movement documents. I analyzed both AEU’s official publication and another publication related to the former. Finally, I used a methodological strategy to analyze my data consistent with the postulates of grounded theory: simultaneity in the collection and analysis of data, a two-step coding procedure, and memo writing (Charmaz 2000, 2001).

**Biographical Identity Integration**

I conceptualize biographical identity integration as a process of applying activist frames to personal experiences to construct a meaningful biography that fits the acquired activist identity. This definition demands a brief excur- sus on the role of personal experience in identity construction.

Personal experience is an *interpretation* of what a person does or has done and of what she recognizes as happening or having happened to her (Geertz 1973). Personal experience, however, is constantly changing because people account for it in temporal perspective and reinterpret the meanings attached to their biographical past in a well-known sociological process (Blumer 1969; Halbwachs [1950] 1992; Mead 1929).

Following from this conceptualization, biographical identity integration fits previous personal experiences into a unifying biography in harmony with a current activist identity. Hence, this process fortifies the blending of personal and collective identities in social movement contexts, and constitutes an important factor in the construction of activist identities.
Preactivist Experiences Integrated into Activism

Through biographical identity integration, activists make sense of personal experiences that predate activism. In their recollections, AEU activists reported having an early environmental “sensibility” that remained true throughout their lives and interpreted it as a constant trait of their personal identities. This sensibility meant the capacity to be aware and touched by certain objects in ways that others may not have been able to experience.

For example, Jorge, a researcher in his thirties, said that this sensibility “has always been there [for him]” and added that “it has not been modified by either being a rightist [who he felt he was when young] or a leftist or anything.” Antonio, a middle-aged man with a natural science degree working in the liberal professions, also said: “The issues related with nature have always been tied to my personality or my self.” Victor, a young engineer, assured me that he did not think his sensibility toward nature had suffered any transformation with time: “I have love for nature, and that has not changed at all.” In the same vein, Carmen, a computer specialist in her thirties, also told me: “Since I was young, I have always loved nature.”

AEU members’ special connection with the environment, manifested in an early love for nature, was at the center of who they were as activists in the present, as they saw a continuity between these early experiences and their current activist concerns. Thus, they engaged in biographical identity integration to make sense of their pre-activist past in ways that were in agreement with current environmental values and identities. In a sense, AEU activists were doing “ecological identity work” (Thomashow 1995, 5).

Susana, a biologist in her late twenties, stressed that her experiences of growing up in a rural area in Spain were essential to her current activist identity. She viewed this connection with the environment as an important part of who she was as an activist, as revealed in the following remarks:

Well, since I was young, I have lived in the countryside. I have always loved the countryside. And in fact, it is where, well, now [residence] for me, I view it like a temporary thing, until I finally move to the countryside. So, obviously, I believe it is very different to grow up in a city, where, well, nature is very, very far away, right, than to live in the countryside, where you have a direct relationship with your environment—with animals, with plants, with your environment.

As Susana’s comments indicate, she construed the city as a place “where . . . nature is very, very far away” and she valued the “direct” experiences with
the natural environment that she had as a youth, marking them as sources of her activist identity. Similarly, Julio, a middle-aged man and a union organizer, reported his experiences in the countryside at a young age and he also identified them as key experiences that accounted for his activist identity. Julio remembered how his grandfather, a farmer, taught him about the natural environment. He also recalled that the environment was important for farmers like his relatives because it was their means of subsistence:

I have always had the environmental issue very close because I was born in a rural village, my grandparents are farmers, and in Spain [in those times], people living in the countryside, they really were living in the countryside . . . well, especially one of my grandparents made me take a much closer contact with nature.

Some environmentalists in AEU, however, would have considered Julio embracing these experiences in his current self-understanding as problematic, since some in AEU criticized farmers harshly for having an instrumental and anti-environmental view of the environment. Nevertheless, Julio’s view did not prevent him from integrating these experiences into a unique biographical story to sustain his activism. In sum, as the cases of Julio and others demonstrate, the specific sort of experience with “nature” that can make someone develop an attachment to the natural environment does not determine environmental activism. In fact, the wide variety of experiences that AEU members claimed as significant reveals that the particularities of these personal experiences are not what matters in building an activist identity. Instead, what matters is the creative process of biographical identity integration. Let me give further illustrations of this process.

Núria, a young administrative assistant and dedicated vegetarian, reported different formative experiences that were nevertheless meaningful to her current activist identity. Growing up in the city, she emphasized how she had a special contact with nature that manifested itself during moments of television watching:

I always had like a mentality. You begin with compassion toward animals. Since I was very young, I remember that at home I watched black-and-white TV, and [that] they were showing bullfighting spectacles. They were showing bullfighting. I mean, I was feeling horrible, because I was seeing that [it] was cruel. And I began like that, and then, I finally convinced my mother to switch the channel when they were having bullfighting on TV.
Other AEU members mentioned different media content, such as Spanish TV documentaries on the animal world which shaped their environmental awareness. Jorge claimed: “I was very influenced by Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente [a well-known nature documentary director], and since I was little I believed that something really serious was happening [to the environment].” Moreover, activists also reflected retrospectively about having been influenced by media content that featured environmental activists. This influence, of course, was prompted by the historically changing circumstances, which made environmentalists available for media consumption when environmental problems entered the political agenda of Western European states (van der Heijden, Koopmans, and Giugni 1992). Bernardo, a middle-aged computer specialist, talked about his memories of the televised GREENPEACE campaigns of the eighties in these terms:

And that was the first big campaign that GREENPEACE had in Spain and all of us saw it like this, these adventurous heroes that we wanted to be, right, when we were young.

In the cases of Bernardo, Núria, and others, we find that biographical identity integration can occur through the interpretation of media content. Framing one’s experiences with the media was common among the environmentalists I interviewed. Less commonly, they identified a specific mode of transportation—a bicycle—to invoke prevalent environmental values and a special connection with the environment. For example, Miguel, a teacher in his twenties, weaved the experience of riding a bicycle into the story of his life and made it a salient element of his current activist identity. He noted:

I have to do some memory. I grew up, for example, with a bicycle, right? At five, more or less, I already had a bicycle. So that all my life I have ridden a bicycle.

Not surprisingly, given the strong association with the vehicle, Miguel came to meet me for our interview equipped with a bicycle. Long after the interview, the bicycle stood out in my memory as a symbol of his commitment to environmentalism. As I have illustrated through other cases, Miguel’s example shows too that having an activist identity involves a process of biographical integration of previous experiences—early memories of a wide array of activities—into a unified narrative of activism describing a continuity of current activism with past sensibility.
To summarize, AEU members integrated past experiences of a special contact with the environment into a biographical storyline. Their experiences emerged from a wide range of circumstances: a rural childhood, outdoors childhood activities (e.g., long hikes under the tutelage of the Fascist movement and Boy Scouts’ activities), helpful guidance of significant others in the appropriate relationship with the environment (e.g., teachings by parents and grandparents, including those living in rural contexts), and even exposure to environmental or non–environmentally friendly television content in an early age. Diverse as these experiences were, they invariably came to be integrated into the construction of their activist identities.

**Previous Activist Experiences**

**Integrated into Current Activism**

If activists elaborated personal experiences that predated activism into their biographical stories to sustain their activist identities, they also integrated past experiences with activism predating their current activism for the same identity purposes. Several members of AEU were in fact past participants in other groups and movements and had long-standing activist concerns before their participation in AEU.

To better illustrate how AEU members integrated past activist experiences into their activist identities, a brief excursus on their disparate experiences with activism seems necessary. There were three main groups of AEU activists according to the duration and historical period of their past social movement participation. The first group consisted of the eldest generation of activists who had taken part in left-wing mobilizations against the dictatorship long before it ended. Some senior members of AEU had been active during the dictatorship and had fought the regime. Emilio, a retired autodidact in his seventies, fits this description. Initially affiliated with the Fascist movement of Francisco Franco in his youth, he changed his political alliance to the Communist Party and sustained a left-wing ideology for the rest of his life.

The second group is composed of the democratic transition generation. The members of this group took several different paths to activism. For instance, while some had not taken part in underground leftist groups, others did. Antonio is part of this second group. He was part of an underground leftist movement strongly opposed to the regime.

The third group is composed of the younger generation who did not take an active role against the dictatorship and missed the heightened mobilization of the democratic transition. Ernesto, a biologist in his thirties, is an example of this last group. Ernesto took part in student organizations when Spain was
a democratic country and later joined an environmental organization which later merged into AEU. Other AEU members from this group followed this path as well. Like many members from all of the different groups I have identified, however, Ernesto viewed activism as a constant in his life. He said: “I had always been involved in activist affairs [before this particular activist experience].”

The presence of these different groups of activists gives AEU a certain character of political depth. The first and second groups lived through a dictatorship, and the political activism that many engaged in sometimes had traumatic consequences. Three of the interviewees had been to prison for a significant period of time. Given their extensive histories of political activism in different movements and groups, these long-term activists framed their personal experience to convey a sense of an overarching activist identity that transcends particular movement affiliations and integrates multiple past experiences into the activist identity.

For instance, Carlos, a middle-aged leader of AEU and researcher, had experiences in different left-wing movements before he became engaged in environmental politics. He participated in the student movement against Franco during the last part of the regime. The starting point of his activist career is the point at which he commenced to integrate other meaningful activist experiences into his biographical storyline.

So my concern starts in college, and I say associated with the student movement in the last period of Franco’s regime. So I finished college in [year], and in [year] I was involved there, right? And at that time I was coming from the Christian world; soon we broke free from there a bunch of people, right? But our starting point is there.

Carlos first got involved in the Catholic-led pro-democracy movement against Franco’s dictatorship. But with the arrival of democracy he joined the neighborhoods’ movement and later on, the environmental movement. Carlos’s experiences in different social movements were all activist experiences. His activist identity comprises identification processes with different temporalities that merge in a unified understanding of the activist self. Like Carlos, Antonio did not separate his current environmental activism from his “initial, strictly political activism.” By strictly political activism, he referred to his participation in an underground political organization working to mobilize students.

Some AEU members from the democratic transition generation signaled that the moment which brought the highest commitment to their activist lives
was precisely the beginning of their activism. This situation applies for Iñigo, an economist in his fifties. Iñigo developed an activist identity when he first became involved in the student movement against Franco, and his past experiences in this movement turned out to be extremely meaningful. As he remarked:

> I have never had, I believe (laughter), so firm a commitment, or a commitment with which I could be putting more on the line than when I was twenty, at that moment.

Even if Iñigo’s commitment decreased in intensity with the passing of time, he did not quit activism. Instead, Iñigo was able to sustain a pervasive activist identity through biographical identity construction. Thus, activists like Iñigo showed commitment to an activist identity despite changes in their social movement involvement in different movements and movement organizations.

In conclusion, what Antonio, Carlos, Iñigo, Núria, Susana, Julio and others prove is that regardless of the type of personal experiences one has had, they can be integrated meaningfully into a narrative that helps sustain an activist identity. Both experiences before activism takes place and experiences with activism can be combined and integrated into a biographical story for activist identity construction.

**Identity Extension**

Snow and McAdam (2000) coin the term *identity extension* by adapting the idea of frame extension to the study of identity construction processes. Frame extension was conceived initially in the literature as a framing activity that SMOs engage in for the purpose of attracting recruits to the movement, and generally refers to a widening of the range of issues of concern for the social movement group in question, not to a substantial reformulation of its major goals (Snow et al. 1986, 472). By contrast, identity extension refers to “the expansion of the situational relevance or pervasiveness of an individual’s personal identity so that its reach is congruent with the movement’s” (Snow and McAdam 2000, 50). This activity presupposes “that personal identity and collective identity cannot be neatly bifurcated and compartmentalized and [that] the personal and collective must be merged, or at least one must be enlarged to embrace the other” (Snow and McAdam 2000, 51).

Identity extension applies to empirical cases when activists extend activist frames to areas of personal life previously undetermined by activism and, thus, it functions to sustain an already acquired activist identity in the direction of more intense commitment. In other words, identity extension is akin
to the strengthening of previously existing activist identification. Through ongoing identity extension, participants in movements increasingly apply activist frames to other spheres of life in a process measured not only by scope but also by intensity.

Jorge’s case provides an example of this process. Jorge framed mountain trekking and climbing as experiences that deepened his commitment to an activist identity. While mountain trekking and climbing seemed unrelated to politics when he started practicing them, Jorge extended collective action frames to these activities and to this area of his life after he became involved in the environmental movement.

And so . . . around that time . . . when I finish college, I begin to do mountain trekking. First, I start with mountain trekking, then I start climbing, and what was an ideological issue, although not very sophisticated, ends up being a very personal interest. Because I begin to see mountains’ degradation, and so, something that was an ideological issue becomes something that is already mine, the mountains’ issue.

As this comment illustrates, Jorge became conscious of “mountains’ degradation” at a level that went beyond the “ideological” into something he saw as “a very personal interest.” It had become personal through identity extension. During my interactions with AEU activists, I discovered abundant identity extension by focusing on the numerous references that activists made to the need for “being coherent.”

**Experiences of Personal Coherence**

AEU activists expressed a particular form of identity extension—“personal coherence” (coherencia)—and spoke of the need for and desirability of “being coherent” (ser coherente). Sara, an AEU member working in an environment-related profession, went through these processes of personal change. Sara reported that she was constantly “watching over” her domestic life, her parenting, her professional activities, and other areas of her life to find out whether she was being a victim of contradictions or whether she could behave as a principled actor with environmental conscience. Sara explained what being coherent meant for her.

A process of personal transformation, but especially of watching over your habits, your behaviors, how you live, right? [That] I would say
yes, well, it is a process that never ends, that you are in it. You discover yourself immersed in millions of contradictions.

As can be gleaned from the previous quote, Sara felt compelled to make sacrifices in her daily life to make sure that more and more of her daily routines were in harmony with her environmental values. She described the consequence of achieving progressively higher degrees of coherence as “losing neutrality in your everyday life.”

The former phrase exemplifies the process of identity extension that Sara and other activists underwent. Sara and others believed that being coherent and developing a coherent activist identity involved reclaiming for activism areas of life previously untouched or unaffected by activism. In this interpretation, what these aspects of life revealed was a “neutrality” that harmed the planet and society and needed to disappear.

How did activists determine that the process of losing neutrality in everyday life had come to fruition? For Sara, this process was ongoing and never-ending. Other activists, however, reported having reached the goal of eliminating the separation between personal life and activism. Julio informed me that he held himself to the highest standards of coherence. For him, the apex of coherence was a life understood in its entirety as activism. Thus, he proudly asserted: “The rest of the facets of my life are also activism.”

Clearly, identity extension had serious consequences for Sara, Julio, and others in their organization. The imperative of being coherent could mean a reshaping of a previous career to bring it into coherence with activism. For example, Lorenzo, a young leader of this organization, interpreted being coherent in relation to his career as a scientist, for which he had been preparing himself for many years, ultimately obtaining a doctorate in his chosen field. To be coherent, Lorenzo reconsidered his projected occupation as a scientific expert and decided to quit his career as a scientist. Once he had adopted an activist identity and engaged in identity extension, he reached the conclusion that “not all science is valid.” He decided that environmental education was an occupation that was more “compatible” with his activist identity (Klatch 2000; see also Whalen and Flacks 1989). This redrawing of the divide between activism and nonactivism is common among activists, who frequently find their activist identities in conflict with other aspects of their self (Lichterman 1996).

Finally, it is worth noting that some activists interpreted personal coherence as a requirement that should apply to all the members of the organization. Miguel decried the lack of personal coherence among the average member of AEU.
But, of course, it is not like this even here, within our own AEU. Every day I see people with their El Corte Inglés [department store] bags, or with Coca-Cola, which they drink. These are small things, right? But I believe that if we do not try little by little to choose some concrete commitments, we cannot open our mouth so much, at conferences and at talks, about changing the world, right?

Miguel argued forcefully for collective coherence or the generalization of the principle of personal coherence to AEU members, even though he confessed that he had not achieved total coherence. Miguel pointed to his international air travel as proof of his own lack of personal coherence. Like other AEU members, he used airplanes to attend meetings, even when he and the other members knew that airplanes produce environmental degradation. Thus, Miguel applied environmental frames to judge his every action and compare his behaviors with those of others. He knew that it was difficult for AEU members to achieve total personal coherence; however, Miguel believed that it was necessary to move beyond conservationist aspirations. Instead, one had to claim anticapitalist principles and take collective actions against capitalist consumption practices and ideas. AEU’s publication also denounced the injustice of the capitalist system, consistent with a political ecology understanding of environmentalism.

In sum, the imperative of coherence is related to a general trait of environmental groups, in Spain and elsewhere (see, e.g., Shepherd 2002), which have a commitment to modify personal behaviors that can threaten or harm the environment. This modification of behavior happens frequently as a consequence of participation in the environmental movement and clearly represents one of the objectives of the movement (Pichardo, Sullivan-Catlin, and Deane 1998).

**Identity Transformation**

Snow and McAdam (2000) adapt frame transformation to the study of identity construction by developing the concept of *identity transformation*. In their foundational article, Snow and his collaborators describe frame transformation as a result of discordance between movement agendas, moral precepts and ideas, and “conventional lifestyles or rituals” (Snow et al. 1986, 473). In their recent adaptation, Snow and McAdam note that identity transformation involves “a dramatic change in identity” and corresponds to “the process described in the conversion literature as ‘biographical reconstruction’” (Snow and McAdam 2000, 52; see also Snow and Machalek 1983).
While AEU members did not confess to me conversion experiences, they did claim having “eye-opening” experiences and revealed undergoing intense identity transformation. In what follows, I demonstrate how activists interpreted eye-opening experiences as those that substantially altered not just how they thought about certain issues but also how they thought about themselves.

**Eye-Opening Experiences**

AEU activists often spoke literally of some experiences as having opened their eyes. These experiences reflect a new way of perceiving reality and are associated with a reshaping of previously held identities in significant ways. Sonia, a woman leader in her forties, related an eye-opening experience which occurred at the beginning of her environmental activism. Although she was the successful founder of an active environmental group in the past, she believed that her transformation into an activist took place because of the influence of a romantic companion who opened “her eyes to the environment.”

And at the beginning we were all women, but he saw that, well, we were doing something. The first meetings were at my place, so he came to the first meeting. I never invited him to participate, and after [he came to know what we were doing] he invited his friends, and so we became a group, women and men together, and it was there. But, in reality, my initial idea of the environment, to open my eyes to the environment, it was his.

Another woman in my sample, Mónica, a homemaker and first-time activist, also had eye-opening experiences as a consequence of her activism in AEU. Finding no grassroots group at the local level, Mónica contacted AEU when she perceived a threat to a forest located near her residence. As a result of joining AEU, she began to see the natural environment in a new way. She even used the metaphor of blindness, indicating that her involvement in AEU had opened her eyes to the environment:

And now I admire it [the natural environment]. So it is exactly like that—that you do not see it. That you have it but do not see it. And so, it was, well, since I got involved in this, since then I look at everything. I look at everything now—everything that surrounds me.

Mónica’s membership in AEU led her to construct an activist identity. Moreover, she succeeded in aligning her activist identity with other identities.
Mónica made clear that her activist identity was a means to strengthening her mother identity and vice versa. She declared that she was taking part in environmental collective action for the sake of her children and grandchildren and, in this sense, blending her activist identity with her mother identity. This theme is also frequently used in AEU’s publication, where the protection of the environment is framed as a duty toward other human beings and generations to come.

However, there are cases where this kind of successful identity alignment may not be possible. The disruption of old ways of perceiving reality provoked by identity transformation can lead activists to leave an “old self” behind. Some AEU members spoke about adopting a “new” self as a consequence of their activism. For instance, Carlos spoke of a “new I” (nuevo yo) emerging out of a difficult process of personal transformation. His adoption of a new identity illustrates the dramatic change in identity alluded to by Snow and McAdam (2000). Carlos informed me that this process was painful and that it involved conflicts with relatives, who were reluctant to accept that he had become an activist and disapproved of his values, ideas, and commitment. He believed that this personal transformation occurred during his college years when he realized that he had a new self: “If I have to define myself, the definition . . . of who I am now lies in my [being] twenty-two years old.” In short, activism transforms old ways of interpreting reality and old self-understandings into new ones—in some cases, through painful personal experiences.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I examine the intersection between experience, framing, and identity and offer an analysis of identity alignment that advances the framing literature. I analyze three processes of activist identity construction and their connection to the framing of experience to explain how the personal and collective aspects of identity align. These three processes—biographical identity integration, identity extension, and identity transformation—are crucial to making sense of the biographical past in light of present activism, blending it in a harmonious narrative, acquiring deeper activist self-understanding, and adopting new conceptions of self.

In particular, the activists in my study fitted their previous personal experiences into a unifying biography in harmony with a current activist identity. In addition, by bringing “coherence” into their lives, they claimed more and more areas of personal life as activist and accomplished identity extension. This process is captured beautifully by Sara’s description of it as “losing neutrality in your everyday life.” In addition, they transformed their identities
as a result of participation. They declared having eye-opening experiences, which substantially altered how they thought not only about environmental issues but about themselves. Consequently, they shed old self-understandings and acquired new ones. In sum, activist identities in social movements are the product of an ensemble of activities that simultaneously reflect conceptions of group identity and the uniqueness of personal experiences drawn from biographical stories.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on identity and social movements. First, I contribute to the literature on identity work and framing by introducing the concept of biographical identity integration. Narrative accounts or stories are central to the study of identity in social movements and other spheres of social life (Benford 2000; Fine 1995; Goffman 1961; Hunt and Benford 1994). By focusing on biographical identity integration, we can illuminate how distinctive and ostensibly disparate personal experiences can be well integrated into biographical stories that sustain activism.

Second, my analysis demonstrates the benefits of a conception of activist identity that transcends Jasper’s organizational and tactical levels of movement identity. Here I extend the notion of activist identity, or the identification with a “broader activist subculture that might nourish several distinct movements” (Jasper 1997, 87). Jasper’s activist identity is particularly relevant to my study because some of the participants in my study were clearly identified with an activist subculture. However, they were also committed to AEU. I explain this double commitment to an activist subculture and to a particular organization (AEU) with the introduction of the concept of biographical identity integration. As illustrated, this process can reconcile seemingly distinct personal experiences—in previous movement groups and movements—into an activist identity. For activists like Carlos or Iñigo, past experiences in other social movements and groups remained meaningful aspects of who they were in the present. Why? Because the experiences they had in previous movements and groups were not elided but integrated into their activist identities. As a result, their identification with an activist subculture associated with other movements and organizations did not subtract from the commitment they felt toward AEU, but deepened it.

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